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ABSTRACT

This paper uses two case studies to explore the risk and opportunities of writing from students' personal experiences. Anthony, a high-achieving, Hispanic fifth-grader, and Anita, a low-achieving, African-American sixth-grader, participated in a writing workshop in which students kept notebooks of their personal experiences and reflections. The two examples provide a means to explore both the risks and opportunities of writing from personal experiences. Anthony's piece reflects some benefits associated with writing from personal experiences, including features such as: (1) authenticity; (2) allowing the writer to develop a voice; (3) potential audience engagement; and (4) the potential therapeutic value. However, Anita's case reveals potential risks, including: unintended consequences from what is revealed; possibilities of limiting students' voice and opportunities to explore other genres; potential cultural conflicts; lack of readiness for some students to reveal emotional issues to peers or the teacher; and a misunderstanding of the role of autobiographical writing in professional authors' work. Implications of the paper suggest that researchers and teachers may need to be cautious about embracing a genre of writing without considering potentially painful outcomes for some students. Nineteen references and appendixes are attached which describe the methods used in the study and present a story and a poem by Anita. (Author/RS)

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Research Report 93-3

Risks And Opportunities of Writing from Personal Experience

Sarah J. McCarthey

National
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Abstract

This paper explores the risks and opportunities of writing from students' personal experiences in two cases. Anthony, a high-achieving, Hispanic fifth-grader, and Anita, a low-achieving, African-American sixth-grader, participated in a writing workshop in which students kept notebooks of their personal experiences and reflections. The two examples provide a means to explore both the risks and opportunities of writing from one's own personal experiences. Anthony's piece reflects some benefits associated with writing from one's own experiences, including features such as: (a) authenticity, (b) allowing the writer to develop a voice, (c) potential audience engagement, and (d) the potential therapeutic value. However, Anita's case reveals potential risks, including (a) unintended consequences from what is revealed, (b) possibilities of limiting students' voice and opportunities to explore other genres, (c) potential cultural conflicts, (d) lack of readiness for some students to reveal emotional issues to peers or the teacher, and (e) a misunderstanding of the role of autobiographical writing in professional authors' work. The implications of this paper suggest that researchers and teachers may need to be cautious abut embracing a genre of writing without considering potentially painful outcomes for some students.

Risks and Opportunities of Writing from Personal Experience

Sarah J. McCarthey

Autobiographical writing is advocated by contemporary literacy educators because it encourages student ownership of topics and texts (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983). Graves (1979) suggests that when students write about topics that come from personal experience, they are invested in their topics and care about "getting it right" (p. 573). In writing autobiographically, students can develop their voices, "to articulate and understand experience" (Calkins, 1986, p. 8). Accounts of personal experience often have the ring of authenticity; they bring the listener or reader into the experience to "live through the processes of reaching" understanding and "permitting us to enter the living space of another" (Rosen, 1988, p. 81).

However, the autobiographical impulse can become the "compulse" in settings such as courtrooms, when one group or individual has power over another (Rosen, 1988). Likewise, when personal writing is imbedded in ordinary school contexts in which the teacher has authority over students, there is the possibility that intimate revelations seem coerced. Thus, personal writing poses both opportunities and risks in current writing classrooms. Such was the case in a 5th/6th grade writing process classroom where students kept notebooks of their personal experiences and reflections.

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Classroom Context

The 5th/6th grade classroom of 28 ethnically diverse students was located in an elementary school situated in a middle class neighborhood in New York City. The teacher, a female Caucasian in her mid-40s, used *Living Between the Lines* (Calkins, 1991) as her inspiration to get students to write from personal experience. Calkins describes writers' notebooks as "invitations to write" (p. 38) in which children, like writers, could generate entries, make notes, write rough drafts, use descriptions, or record what they notice about the world around them. Students then draw from these notebooks to create more polished pieces, called "projects," for eventual sharing with a wider audience. In selecting topics from their notebooks for projects, students should find "the meaning in the moments" (p. 74), and select topics that "feel significant" or "reveal something bigger" (p. 61).

Ms. Meyer shared Calkins's emphasis upon writing from personal experience. Her rationale for students keeping notebooks was the following:

> Well, I think what I want from them is to be able to just get them to become chroniclers of life, of their lives. I think for me the most important thing is that I give them this gift of being able to observe their lives and to look at themselves and what they're doing and their place in the world and be able to keep track of that. . . . I think it's really a very nice gift to be able to give children to teach them to be observers and recorders of their lives

> and the lives around them. That's what I really hope that they'll get, that they'll take always with them, that this gift will last forever.

Ms. Meyer believed that through the notebooks students could record their own lives. Part of her rationale for providing this opportunity for children reflected her sadness that she had not chronicled her own life:

> I think one of the saddest things in my life is that I never wrote down all of these things that I thought I would always remember but that I didn't. I'm very envious of people who always do, who wrote in notebooks and kept their feelings. They chronicled their lives and just had it for whatever reasons, whether they never looked at it or whether they always looked at it.

Ms. Meyer believed so strongly in children writing about their own lives that she discouraged students from writing fiction. She provided three reasons: (a) "real authors," such as children's authors, wrote from their own experience, (b) students wrote better pieces when they wrote about their own lives, and (c) she could not monitor their writing nor teach them the qualities of good writing using fiction. She believed that early in the school year the students were too unsophisticated to see that fiction writing was based on "truth"—the personal experience of authors:

> [Students] don't have an idea that it really is the same and that fiction writing should really be based on truth from their notebooks. In other words, nobody goes out, Katherine Paterson, [a children's author] nobody goes out and writes a piece of fiction that isn't based on truth somehow or somewhere. You know what I mean, and if they did do fiction, it should really have come, should come from their notebooks at some point.

Students have to write from their own experience because:

> Otherwise you get these stories about Ninja Turtles and that G.I. Joe is coming alive and about people living on the moon. It's not based in any kind of fact or any kind of research or any kind of reality. Whatever their story is about, they're not doing any research into the reality of the fiction, you know?

Ms. Meyer had found that students wrote long, unwieldy fantasy stories when a teacher allowed them to write fiction without instruction about the qualities of good writing. She acknowledged that students liked to write fiction, but she felt they did not learn anything from such writing. She said, "They [students] like to [write fiction] but they don't learn anything from it, they never learn anything from it, ever."

Ms. Meyer's beliefs about the value of autobiographical writing were influenced by both her own personal experiences, not having written about her own life, and her interactions with Calkins and her books. Ms. Meyer's valuing of writing from personal experience affected her interactions with students. These interactions affected two students, Anthony and Anita, who had differing experiences with writing autobiographically in this classroom (See Appendix A for a description of the methods used in this study.).

Opportunity: The Case of Anthony

Anthony was a nine-year-old fifth grader whose parents came from Puerto Rico. He considered Puerto Rico a second home although he had lived in Manhattan all of his life. His father was a local newscaster; his mother worked in the school as an aide. Anthony considered himself an inventor and a writer. He often experimented with scientific activities at home and kept a scientific journal of his discoveries. He read a great deal, especially fiction, and liked writing, although he revealed that he frequently got "writer's block." Anthony had participated in writing process classrooms before by virtue of his attendance at this school where other teachers had used features of the Writing Workshop. He expressed, however, that this classroom was different because he could write with his "heart," whereas last year he used his "head" to write reports.

Anthony looked forward to the opportunity to write a personal, expressive piece about his grandmother. He said, "when I write, I use my heart. . . . I want to write something very, very lovely like I love my grandmother." Writing about his grandmother provided the

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opportunity to write an authentic piece about a significant figure in his life, his grandmother. Before choosing his grandmother as the topic for his project, Anthony had written seven pieces about his grandmother in his notebook. He selected many lines from these stories about his experiences with her and made several revisions before his final draft.

The teacher encouraged his selection of topic and in two conferences with him discussed the organization of the piece and suggested that he add more description of her. In the middle of one conference, Ms. Meyer became particularly engaged in Anthony's text:

20. T: Now I want to see a total description/ I want you to work right now/ "My grandmother always wore loose clothes//" I want you to fill up this page now with descriptions of what she looked like// That's all/ and then show it to me// OK/ Just what she looked like/ the kinds of things she wore/ what her face was like/ what her hair was like// [*as she says "wore," "face," and "hair," her voice softens and she draws out those words*]

[As she is saying this, Ms. Meyer writes (1) description, (2) pilon, stories, and (3) heights on Anthony's typed piece.]

21. Anthony: I remember/ [*softly, drawn out*]

22. T: Go ahead/ Go ahead// So now you can say/ "thank god/" You can start it that way// I ***love*** that/" Thank ***god***/ I remember/ I still remember// what my grandmother looked like//" It is just what you just said/ "What my grandmother/ looked like//" OK?/ [*her voice gets soft, she draws out "god" and emphasizes the words*]

[Anthony is writing.]

Now you can start it like that/ "She always/ wore loose clothes/" What did they look like?/

23. Anthony: They were/ I always saw blue with hearts on it// [*draws out "blue" in a reverent tone*]

As she was giving him suggestions, she stopped to read his piece. Then she provided him positive feedback for the parts of his text she liked. Anthony's first audience, the teacher, responded positively to his language about his grandmother. She seemed to be responding to his use of a vivid memory from his experience with his grandmother and the tone of Anthony's voice which indicated a kind of reverence for her.

Anthony continued to work on the project about his grandmother. His final project reflects the care for and connection with his grandmother:

My Grandmother Matilda

Thank god I still remember what my Grandmother looked like; she always wore loose cloths. She used to wear embroiderd flowers on her blue gown. It was the most Beautiful Dark Blue, more bluer than the sky. Her shoes were black with a Brown zig zag bottom; when she walked she limped like a man with a cane. Thank god I saw her because she always loved me I mean realy loved me. She used to play the pilion, a pilion is a kind of instrument that you pound and it makes a high piched ding that filled the whole niehborhood. I would play the drum and we would go to the park and have lunch and go to the hight's and have a ice that is called a piragua. (it's a ice that is shaved from a big block of ice and there are flavors that you have to pick and the ice is put into a cup and then the flavor in the cup and then you eat it and drink it. When you go to 181st it gets noizy and people come gushing in to the streets and they put out there tables and start to sell. it's weird when we came home it's different. in the morning people dont come gushing into the streets and you cant get the mouth watering flavor of the air and the frut flys hitting your face like a mist of water. it's so poluted in new york so you cant sell or get a piragua. my grandmother took me to kentucky fried chicken. it was the most oily good chicken and I almost ate the whole thing and the room looked like a lot of pigs just ate the time of there life and they were right. I remember when I was five years old and my grandmother was dying and I herd a scream that filled the whole room and gave me a chill down my spine I went to her room and I

> kissed her and huged her and she took me by the sholders and said that she was going to die and she cryed. my grandmother always wanted to see me get old but she dyed to soon.

In the beginning of the piece, Anthony used many adjectives to describe his grandmother. He then related several incidents of shared times with his grandmother. Anthony sprinkled imagery, similes, and other figures of speech throughout his piece. Expressions of his love for his grandmother characterize the piece, culminating in the most powerful aspect of the piece—the ending where he witnessed her death.

One of the features that makes this piece appealing is the autobiographical nature of it. Anthony's experience of hearing a "scream that filled the room" may be uniquely his; yet, as readers, we can connect the event to our own feelings of loss upon losing loved ones, especially if we have been at their death beds. His piece reveals something about his experience that seems authentic. We get to know Anthony as well as his grandmother through his rendering of his relationship with her.

We hear Anthony speaking when he reports, "she took me by the sholders and said that she was going to die and she cryed." We can also imagine the therapeutic value for Anthony in having the opportunity to experience this significant event with his teacher and peers. Like clients, encouraged by therapists and counselors, who keep a journal of their feelings to work through them, Anthony may have been able to work through his sadness and loss by writing about his grandmother.

Anthony's experience of writing about his grandmother and the resulting descriptive piece provide a lens to see the opportunities for self-understanding and audience engagement that autobiographical writing can provide. The case of Anita, however, offers a contrast. Instead of being an opportunity for self-awareness and satisfaction, writing from personal experience was filled with caution and fear.

Risk: The Case of Anita

Anita was an eleven-year-old sixth grader from the Bronx who took the train to school each morning by herself. She was an African-American who lived with her brother and her mother, who worked as a housekeeper. Anita liked singing and dancing and entertaining people, although she was very withdrawn in whole-group class discussions. In fact, Anita never contributed orally to any of the classroom discussions, nor did she share her writing with the whole class. She had few opportunities to participate in writing process classrooms previously; she reported having done little writing before and this was her first year at this school.

Anita's notebook was filled with entries of incidents in her life. She wrote about the good times she had in a swimming pool, learning to play kickball and the resulting good feelings about being able to succeed at something, dressing up as a singer, going to the beach, and a grandfather who was good to her. Her notebook also contained entries about her "bully" brother and four entries about her abusive father. None of these entries explicitly described physical abuse to her. However, one entry indicated abuse to her brother and her subsequent negative feelings about her father:

> it riminds me of my father he dose not think of loving he abouse people and one day he punch my brother right in his heart and we never liked him again

Other entries implied an unhappy relationship with an unkind father who would do strange things like hanging their dog. She also described a woman in her father's life who hit the children and yelled at them.

Interviews with Anita indicate that she saw her notebook as performing a kind of therapeutic function. She described it this way:

> It helps me put away the memory of what bad things happened to me. I can put it in my notebook so I won't want to remember it so much. Like the time when my uncle asked me to do something with him and I didn't do it.

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However, Anita did not write about the incident with her uncle that she reported in her interview. In fact, she seemed in conflict about what things were appropriate to include. There were things that she believed were so personal that they should not be shared with anyone:

> I told my mother. But that one I didn't really write in my notebook because I didn't feel like it would be good . . . because I didn't really like anybody else should know about it except for my family.

Anita was excited enough about her experiences with her notebook to tell a woman she met on the train about what a notebook was. She liked writing in it so much that she had encouraged the woman on the train to keep one. Here is what she reported:

> I would say that [a] notebook is something you write stuff in that makes you feel sad, happy, and stuff like that. And I was telling a lady on the train yesterday what a notebook is for because she didn't really know. . . . I told her a notebook is for things that happen to you like if you get, if you think somebody had been trying to hurt you, you just write it in your notebook. And when it happens now anybody could find your notebook and pick it up and read what is in there.

Anita's responses express conflict about sharing her responses with others. She believed that her notebook could provide a place to write both the good things and the bad things that had happened to her. It could provide information to other people that might help her or hurt her. Her conflict about whether to include events of a highly personal nature persisted into her selection of a topic for her project for a wider audience.

Anita spent about two weeks writing a lengthy entry in her notebook about her experiences at Lenox Hill Camp. In this entry (see Appendix B), Anita discussed the students who had gone on the trip, games of spin-the-bottle played, and activities at the camp. Although this is a "personal experience" story, it did not contain the kind of emotional, revealing content that Anthony's story contained. The teacher, Ms. Meyer, believed that Anita had more important issues about which to write. In an interview, Ms. Meyer expressed her view of how she had hoped that Anita would write about something that seemed "important" to her, such as her father, instead of writing about these series of events from camp:

> I wanted her to try to see what was the bottom, what was the bottom of all this, you know what I mean, all these horrible pieces that she has, all these bad luck things. . . . I was hoping that she would um, you know she's got all of these horrible stories. And I didn't want to let her do that [write about Lenox Hill Camp] because that would have been just one of those you know, I went to great adventure kind of things, I had a lot of fun, I hid in the woods.

Ms. Meyer believed that Anita's story lacked getting to "the bottom" of something, which seems to mean being reflective about an event or person and describing its emotional impact. In contrast, writing about Lenox Hill Camp is of the "great adventure" genre which lacks emotional impact and focus.

The conflict between Ms. Meyer's views of what was important and Anita's was reflected in the writing conference the teacher conducted with Anita. Early in the conference, Anita indicated she was planning on selecting the Lenox Hill Camp piece for her final project. The teacher tried to find out why Anita wanted to write about that by asking what was important about the camp experience. When Anita simply described the events, the teacher responded in this way:

33.	T:	It is so interesting/ Anita/ that you you talk about writing that because there are so many entries/ when I look through this/ I would have thought that the thing that would have stood out to you most would have been about your father// You have so many entries about your father in here// [*pace slows down*] (She reads from text slowly with feeling) "When I was living in Jamaica I had a farm/ We had chickens and my father has something like/ an idea to let the chickens"//
34.	Anita:	Lay eggs—

35. T: "Lay eggs and sell them/" I mean/ I could just see this becoming/all the like/ you know/ either the good times/ [*pace slowed down*] You had a lot of good times and a lot of bad times with your father/ right? [*pace quickened*]

36. Anita: Yeah/ [*agreeing unenthusiastically, falling tone*]

37. T: You know/It seems to me that/ you have all these entries about the good and the bad times about your father and maybe you should just pick one//You know I'm not trying to tell you what to do/ you know but/ it seems to me that you have more important stuff in here than/Lenox Hill camp// You know what I mean?//Unless you don't really want to write about it/Do you have other good entries about your father here besides this one?//

38. Anita: Not really// [*drawn out syllables*]

When prompted, Anita pointed out several places where she had written things about her father. While Anita complied with the teacher's request to find examples of her father, she also resisted by pointing out examples of different topics. Ms. Meyer continued to focus on the topic of Anita's father and suggested she think about "important" issues. The conference continued:

51. T: Mhmmm/ I don't know// (sighs, long pause) I think you need to think// I think you really need to go through this book/ right? /Really go through this book very carefully and read it very carefully/ And take another color pen/ OK/ and underline/ all of the sentences in your book/ all of the places in your book where you think you wrote something so beautifully and that it was so important for you/ OK?/ Because I think/ Anita that you have **really really deep** and **important** things/ to say/ about relationships and about your mother and your father and I just don't think/ that Lenox Hill/ is the most important thing for you in here// If you decide that that is what you want to do/ OK/ If it turns that after this you can't find/ some big important idea that comes out of this for you that you would like to write about/ [*pace slowed down, former said very deliberately*] Maybe it's going to be wishing/ you know/ that your father were different/ that you could have more good times like the time in Jamaica// [*pace speeds up*] Maybe you could really really write up that time in Jamaica because that was a really good time/ wasn't it?//

52. Anita: (no audible response)

53. T: Right/ Can you describe what Jamaica looked like/ and/ what it was like being there with your father/ and you know the good times// Maybe for you it's kind of like wishing there were more of those good times/ Are you in touch with your father? Do you know—

54. Anita: All I know is that he is living at my grandmother's/ [*dull, unenthusiastic tone*]

55. T: Do you know where to write to him? I mean maybe you could write—

56. Anita: My mother knows her address/

57. T: So maybe it would be a nice letter to him/ "Dear dad/ I remember Jamaica"/ and you know you could write this whole beautiful thing about Jamaica/ and "I wish we could have more times like that"/ You know/ Maybe that is something you would like to do as a way of contacting your father// you know?/ I mean that is a thought/ You think about it/ I don't want to/ you know/ you decide what you think you want to do// Because somehow with all this important stuff/ you know/ I am wondering whether/ Lenox Hill Camp/ is really important to you/ and if it is/ then you have to decide why it was so important to you/ OK?/ Maybe it is more important than just because you had a good time/ maybe there is more stuff there than just you had a good time/

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The underlying message in this conference was that Lenox Hill Camp in itself was not an important enough issue or that Anita needed to find some underlying meaning from her experience. Simply having a good time was not an appropriate topic for a project for a larger audience. Although this may not have been Ms. Meyer's intention, her response to Anita seems almost as if she were trying to coerce some type of revelation. However, after the teacher's conference with Anita, the student did reveal to the researcher an example of physical abuse of which the teacher had not been aware. The revelation caused subsequent discomfort for the teacher, the student, and the researcher, although the child also received some help.

Encouraged to write about her confusing, upsetting relationship with her father, Anita was faced with a dilemma: how to please the teacher and, at the same time, avoid a painful topic. Anita resolved this dilemma by writing about neither Lenox Hill camp nor her father. Instead, she wrote a poem about her grandfather (see Appendix C). By selecting the topic of a person who was close to her, but not abusive, she fulfilled the teacher's implicit criterion of writing about somebody "important," yet she did not have to risk self-revelation of a potentially painful topic, her father.

Anita's experience raises questions about potential risks of writing from personal experience, including: (a) unintended consequences from what is revealed; (b) possibilities of limiting students' voice; (c) potential cultural conflicts; (d) lack of readiness for some students; and (e) a misunderstanding of the role of autobiographical writing in professional authors' work.

First, the focus on deep, personal response may create unintentional emotional consequences in a classroom. In Anita's case, she revealed information that had emotional consequences for everyone involved. Certainly the teacher needed to be aware of the situation to find help for Anita. Although child abuse is widespread, many teachers have had little experience or training in handling issues that emerge through children's writing. If the teacher is not prepared psychologically or emotionally to respond to the painful elements of students' lives and find the appropriate support, it is questionable whether teachers should encourage their students to write deep, personal pieces. At the same time, teachers may feel pushed into the role of therapist without adequate preparation or outside support. To provide students with mixed messages, encouraging them to write "deep, important things about relationships" while at the same time not being prepared for the consequences, may be confusing and a source of discomfort to students.

Second, a focus on writing from personal experience may limit some students' voices. Anita may have felt more comfortable using another genre rather than the personal. Other genres of writing (e.g., fiction) may provide students with opportunity to make sense of their lives in a way that does not necessarily require them to reveal deep personal issues or may provide outlets that make them less vulnerable to the consequences. Autobiographical writing may limit some students' access to other forms of knowledge (Smagorinsky, 1987). Process programs emphasizing writing from personal experience may have "institutionalized" this genre in such a way that students are discouraged from using other forms, such as expository or fiction writing, as vehicles to communicate with other audiences.

A third problem in promoting writing from personal experience is that teachers may come into conflict with values of students from other cultures. Anita said that there were events in her life she did not think she should share with anyone who was not in her family. For some students, writing about their own personal relationships or experiences may conflict with cultural values; sharing personal issues, even if they are not painful ones, may be inappropriate in certain families or cultures. An emphasis upon personal writing may appear to be "culture free"—that is, presumed to be appropriate for all students, regardless of culture or class. However, assuming that "one size fits all" (Reyes, 1991) may disengage students from diverse backgrounds who do not share a value of revealing personal events.

Fourth, because students learn in different ways and bring different background knowledge and experience with them, some students may not be ready to transform their experiences into writing for a larger audience. Unlike Anthony, who wanted to write about his sad experiences, Anita, who was new to notebook writing and project writing, most likely did not understand initially that her notebook writing would be made public to the teacher or to others. When she realized that she was expected to draw from her painful experiences hinted at in her notebook, she selected a safer topic. She was not ready to share her upsetting experiences with the teacher. Teachers may need to be aware of this lack of readiness for some students.

A fifth risk of emphasizing autobiographical writing to the exclusion of other forms is that students may conclude that all writing is of an autobiographical nature. Ms. Meyer's belief that writers such as Katherine Paterson drew heavily from their experience framed her interactions with students. Ms. Meyer's view is consistent with writing process approaches that model themselves after "what real writers do" (Calkins & Harwayne, 1987, p. 74). The assumption is that authors write to make sense of their own lives; students ought to model themselves after these professional writers. However, not all professional writers draw from personal experience. Smagorinsky (1987) notes that journalists, researchers, and essayists are professional writers who rarely write from their own experience. Additionally, while some authors of children's books (e.g., Arnold Lobel, Max Dann, and Simon French) use their own lives as material for stories, many authors do not draw from their own lives. Poets including Jack Prelutsky and Eve Merriam, for instance, find words or abstract ideas as starting points for developing poems. Observing other people, seeing pictures, hearing songs or conversations, or beginning with an imagined character are ways authors generate ideas that are not autobiographical (Lloyd, 1987).

Conclusion

The cases of Anthony's and Anita's experiences with autobiographical writing illustrate both the risks and opportunities of this genre. In the case of Anthony, his desire to write about his grandmother and the teacher's positive response to his piece came together in his personal narrative. His rendering of her death in his text demonstrates the opportunities for authenticity, finding his own voice, and the therapeutic value. In contrast, the case of Anita illustrates potential risks of writing from personal experience. The potential for coercion for students who are not ready to reveal personal issues, limiting students' voices by narrowing the number of possible genres, potential cultural conflicts, and a misunderstanding of the role of autobiographical writing in professional authors' work are some of the unintended consequences of autobiographical writing raised by Anita's experiences in this classroom.

These cases have several practical issues to consider in relation to autobiographical writing. First, in researchers' and practitioners' quest for ways to change writing practices, we may have embraced a genre of writing without questioning the possible consequences of diverse students' use of that genre. We may have come to assume that writing about our own experiences is somehow inherently good. The case of Anita forces us to challenge that assumption. Second, we may need to be sensitive to the possibility of coercion or cultural conflicts when we value students' autobiographical writing too highly. Yet, given the potential for unintended consequences, teachers and researchers should not discourage students from writing autobiographically—there is much to be gained for student and reader. However, we should consider the risks as well as the opportunities of writing from personal experience.

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APPENDIX A

Methods

The philosophical assumptions that undergirded this study were consistent with interpretive traditions articulated by Erickson (1986). Methods of data collection drew from Bogdan and Biklen's (1982) approach to qualitative research.

Sources of Data

Data were collected over a five-week period of time beginning in the second week of October. For the first two weeks of the study, students kept notebooks (which they had been keeping since mid-September) where they recorded personal experiences, memories, observations of the world, or responses to literature they were reading. The students were generally free to write about topics of their own choice. During the last three weeks of the study, students were in the process of selecting an issue, theme, or important person from their notebooks to turn into a revised, polished piece for a larger audience, such as classmates, parents, or relatives.

Classroom observations. Classroom observations of activities during writing time were videotaped and audio taped. The audio tapes were transcribed verbatim and supplemented by field notes. The activities during writing time included (a) teacher-directed lessons in which the teacher and students discussed issues related to writing (mini-lessons), (b) writing time in which the students worked on their individual texts, (c) teacher-student writing conferences in which the teacher discussed the students' texts with them, and (d) share sessions in which a student shared a text and the whole class responded.

Teacher interview. The teacher interview provided data about the teacher's intentions and perceptions of the various writing activities and perceptions of students. Questions focused on her goals for the students during the writing time, her perceptions of the students as writers, and her perceptions of the texts that students had produced. I interviewed the teacher on two occasions during the five weeks.

Interviews with students. Two different types of interviews were conducted with each student—formal and informal. Formal interviews took place at the beginning (entry interviews) and again at the end of data collection (exit interviews), were given outside the classroom context, and used a set of predetermined questions for all students. Questions in the entry interview focused on the backgrounds of students, their beliefs and attitudes about writing, and the texts from their notebooks. Questions in the exit interview focused on their completed drafts and events that had occurred within the classroom.

Informal interviews were conducted within the classroom context on a frequent basis. Questions emerged from the classroom context and were unique to each individual. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim.

Student texts. All notebook entries that the students had written since the beginning of the year were collected and photocopied. In addition, each draft of the project was collected, including the revised final project.

Analyses

Analyses of the data for this paper drew from classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student texts. Using both the videotape and the audio tape data, I performed a systematic microanalysis similar to Erickson's (1977) of the writing conferences and focused on the conversational strategies of the teacher and students. These strategies drew from sociolinguistic research that suggests that meaning is created both by how speakers interact as well as what they say (Cazden, 1986; Florio-Ruane, 1987). A small group of researchers watched segments of the videotaped observations with me to provide additional perspectives and validation for interpretations of the verbal and nonverbal interactions between the teacher and students.

I analyzed body language and proxemic cues (Hall, 1966), conversational moves by the teacher such as interrogatives, statements, and commands (Cazden, 1986), and conversational moves by the student such as initiation of topic, agreement, lack of agreement, explanation, or request for information. Additionally, aspects of discourse such as prosodic cues including pauses, pitch, stress, and speed were used where appropriate (Tannen, 1984). These features were important to understanding how the teacher and student negotiated a shared understanding within the writing conference. Excerpts for this paper represented instances of the teacher focusing on autobiographical writing.

The unit of analysis was the speaker turn, consistent with Bakhtin's (1986) suggestion that the "utterance" (equivalent to speaker turn) ought to be the unit of analysis for analyzing dialogue, as opposed to the linguistic form of the sentence. Turns are indicated by a numbering system, beginning with the first speaker turn. Pauses are indicated in the transcripts by one slash (/) indicating a short pause and two slashes (//) indicating a longer pause. Overlapping talk is indicated by the use of a dash (—). Words that were emphasized by the teacher or student are underlined. Nonverbal cues, especially proxemic relationships such as distance between speakers, played a role in describing interaction styles (Hall, 1966) and are noted in the text.

Interview data functioned in a supportive role to provide further context and the participant's point of view about interactions. The teacher's interviews were categorized according to central classroom themes and perceptions of the individual student. Excerpts from the interviews in this paper were chosen to represent the teacher's views of writing. Student interviews were categorized according to background, views about writing, topics, and perceptions of classroom interactions. Excerpts are focused on the students' views of notebook writing.

Student texts were analyzed by reading all of the examples from students' notebooks and projects and categorizing them by topic. I used both inductive categories that emerged from individual texts as well as deductive categories that arose from using the teacher's beliefs about writing such as writing from personal experience. I examined them by noting stylistic features such as a elements of an oral text and features such as use of imagery and figurative language.

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APPENDIX B

Anita's Story

Lenox Hill Camp

My teacher was saying something and I remember the time when my old class went to Lenox Hill camp we had a lot of fun My bus was the first bus to leave a couple of us was in the bus I'll name the people. Ophelia, Cindy, Jasmin, bosise, Micle, Antony, marcus, patric, Joey, and me our bus was the first to leave After that the other bus came The teacher disided to pick out the rooms for girls and boys We were in scode [squad] one and the other class was in scoude [squad] two well [while] the girls were less [last]. what I mean was that there were less girls. The scond [second] day that we were there the boys were Trying to come in our room. and then we plade [played] a game, spin the botle. it was a realy bad game. I'll tell you how it gose you take a botle and spin it and if it lands on a girl, then they have to wate [wait] and then you spin it agian and if it points at a boy, the girl and the boy have to go in the colset and do something and if you don't you get a slap so when I went in the closet with the boy we acted like we were doing something But we were not and I put spit all over my mouth and came out of there and they said Had fun I was like yes I had a lot of fun. and then our class introctor [instructor] came and brought us outside and we went on the seld [sled] and hade a lot of fun we went down a little hill and went on the seld and then my friend Ophlea and I were talking [taking] some ice out of the water. it was winter. It was realy cool and it was the Bigest piece of ice you ever seen. I Loved Lonx hill camp. it was like we went hikeing and I wore my water baiters [boots] and it had a hole in it and my feet were frezing so much you could do me thing [something] with it. Well then that night my teacher read us a horrour story and I got real Scared and then I could hardly sleep and one Time we aske the teacher to get a drink of water. She looked kind of wear [weird]. When she said yes, I saw some smoke come out of her mouth. I was really sick. I was so scared that the, that she might be smoking crack because she was like acting like strange all the time. Every morning and every day every morning and everybody is like was she really smoking at my table the ones that were in my group and maybe a litle and the next day maybe a litle The next day we had to go hiking so we went we learned about foot tracks, animals I don't remember how the squirel looked and anyway we went on the bridge blindfold and my friend Jasmin was Ok when I did her and when she did me I almost fell off she was so dumb. we went back to the camp it was fun Fun. we went on the hike but I got really scared because she put me at the edge of the bridge I was like get this thing off of me and I almost throw up on her. So I took off the blindfold and I was at the edge of the bridge. She was very careless. She put me at the edge of the bridge.

APPENDIX C

Anita's Poem

The Poem about My Grandfather
The sun shines bright
The plums smell sweet
The birds fly high
and my Grandfather is nice Just like
you see, Grandpa! Grandpa! I'll never leave
you, Grandpa! Grandpa! I miss you so much
Grandpa! Grandpa! Come back to me and
I'll come back to you, Grandpa! Grandpa!
I'll heare you in my hart! You are Sweet
like a plum and you are nice like a bIRD
I'll keep you in my hart tonight and
let the stars shine so bright

I MISS you
GrandpA

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